

## **Strengthening Families Program Tip Sheet #4: Cultural Adaptations**

### **Introduction**

Research suggests that most generic prevention programs with evidence of effectiveness are also effective for most ethnic populations. However, a culturally adapted prevention program is more respectful of the participants' values and traditions, including parenting traditions. Being more respectful of the participants and talking about things and traditions they can identify with helps with recruitment and retention of the families, which is critically important in disseminating SFP. Hence, culturally-adapting the Strengthening Families Program for your cultural group may not improve the outcome results, but should help to improve the numbers of families you can attract to your program.

### **Why is Cultural or Local Adaptation Important?**

You can purchase a culturally specific SFP for all major ethnic populations. However, you still need to make local and cultural adaptations. A culturally specific or culturally competent program developed for an ethnic group in one area of the country may not work in a different area of the country or with a slightly different ethnic group. There are many different Asian and Pacific Island (API) countries with different languages and culture. The Strengthening Hawaii's Families Program first attempted to develop a specific SFP for each of 12 different API cultures and then gave up to create a generic Hawaiian cultural version which blends many of these Island cultural traditions.

One of the most difficult cultural adaptations is that for American Indian families. There are over 500 recognized American Indian tribes and most have different languages and different traditions. Some overall belief systems and traditions are being incorporated into the Five Feathers (Shoshone/Bannock tribe) version, now being modified again by five different tribes.

Spanish-speaking families come from many areas of the world and have different traditions and even different words for the same things. This is the reason that it is difficult to develop a single Spanish language version. The Denver and El Paso Spanish language versions of SFP were primarily developed for Mexican-immigrant families, whereas versions now being developed in Bronx, New York by the Inwood Community Center is more for Dominican families and the Florida versions are more for Puerto Rican families. For instance, even though the SFP has been adapted for all major ethnic groups: African American, Hispanic, Asian and Pacific Islander, and American Indian, greater specificity and tailoring can be made.

Hence, the developers of the Strengthening Families Program recommend that all implementations of the SFP be culturally and locally adapted using the most closely relevant cultural version. If you are working with multi-ethnic families, then the generic SFP is recommended as the base version to be locally modified.

## **Degree of Modifications: Not Throwing the Baby Out with the Bath Water**

Unlike most parenting and family models, the developers of the Strengthening Families Program recommend that local modifications be made by the local implementers. We are talking about modifications not in the basic structure of the SFP, but in the way it is presented. For instance, it is recommended that you:

1. **Do Not Change the Three Component SFP Format.** The Strengthening Families Program is designed to operate with three complete program run simultaneously—the Parent Training Program, the Children’s Skills Training Program, and the Family Skills Training Program. If you drop any one of these components, research on SFP suggests you will reduce the likelihood of getting as positive results. The Parenting Program primarily reduces negative, acting out behaviors and gets kids to do their chores and behave better at home, the Children’s Social Skills Program improves the children’s social skills and pro-social behaviors. Only the last Family Skills Training Component implemented in the second hour helps to improve the family relationships and provides time for these families to practice what they have been learning in their separate groups.
2. **Do Not Reduce the Program Length.** Research on modified versions suggests that reducing SFP to 10 or 12 sessions or anything less than 14 sessions results in reduced effectiveness if you are working with high risk, multiple need families. If you are working with low need, well educated parents who have already read a lot about parenting or attended other parenting classes, you might be able to shorten the program to about 10 sessions. Still there is much to cover.
3. **Do Not Change the Program Format.** Currently the program is designed to operate once a week, however, the program is robust and still appears to work when shortened to seven weeks. This can be accomplished by having two sessions each week spread apart by two days so the parents can practice their homework. This 7-session format works well in homeless shelters, residential programs, pre-release centers where the parents or families will be in residence for less than 14 weeks.
4. **Do Not Move Sessions into a Different Order.** The program was designed to flow in a manner recommended by research results. You need to begin with Family Strengths and positive things to engage families and get them to begin thinking more positively. In addition, this recognizes their unique strengths and value. Research also suggests that the first focus on parenting should be in increasing the number of verbal rewards and praise made to a child. After the parent/child relationship is improved, then the child is more willing to be disciplined and spend time in family meetings.

## **What Cultural Adaptations are Recommended?**

To achieve maximal benefits for the participating families, it is recommended that the local

implementers make cultural modifications to the program. This does not have to be formalized into a new written manual, but can be achieved with notes on the manuals or as “cheat sheets cards” as to what you will say and do that is more culturally-relevant. On grants, some sites have completely rewritten the manuals to make their modifications. So what are the recommended cultural changes?

1. **Culturally-adapt SFP Exercises.** The SFP includes a number of exercises and games. Anytime there is a popular exercise or game that has the same goal or objective, you can substitute it. For example, in the SFP the children are learning to listen carefully by playing the Simon Says Game or the Gossip Game. If there is a local or traditional culturally specific game (e.g., American Indian or Hispanic) that teaches children to listen carefully, then it can be substituted.
2. **Changing the Names and Places.** You should change any names of children or parents used in examples or stories or puppet play to more common local names. For instance, in the Parent Training Manual, the examples read to the parents say, “Ann did a great job by...” The name of the child in this example is a very white, western name and should be changed to more culturally popular names of the children of the parents in your program. For traditional Spanish-speaking or Hispanic, names like Maria, Manual, Jose, etc. can be substituted. In addition, you should change any locations or places to ones that are popular locally.
3. **Changing Exercises or Recommended Behaviors to Be More Culturally Appropriate.** In the Children’s Skills Training program the children are instructed that when they want to listen to someone, they should look them in the eye. That is not respectful in all cultures. This should be changed or at least the children should be told that when listening in school to White teachers they should look the teacher in the eye, but should be respectful with grandparents and elders.
4. **Assuring Traditional Parenting Practices are Honored.** It is not the intent of the SFP to remove effective traditional parenting practices from the participants. Hence, any place in the manuals where the recommended approach is not likely to be an improvement on traditional practices, the traditional parenting practices should be retained. The only time a change is recommended is when the traditional discipline practices would get the parents in trouble with protective services. If this is the case, it is recommended that the parents be educated by having a person from protective services attend one of the three sessions on limit setting, preferably session 11 and explain the laws of this country.